

Les MacKinnon

January 10, 1950 to May 11, 2015

Les' personal history with the black community, and his forage in uncovering and resurrecting buried "black" tombstones in Priceville, Ontario, towards achieving Ontario Heritage and Ontario Historical Association recognition, supplement a few of his awards and Black History contributions including:

- The Owen Sound Emancipation Celebration Festival "Community Recognition Award" "In Appreciation for Outstanding Contributions Representing the Significance of "Community, Roots & Culture" along with the likes of Lincoln Alexander and Lawrence Hill in 2002.
- The Owen Sound Emancipation Festival Award of Heritage Contributions 2015
- The Grey County Historical Society award of Heritage Certificate of Recognition for 2015. and the
- The Ontario Historical Society 2014 Carnochan Award to for "many years of service to Ontario's heritage community"

"Les MacKinnon epitomized Grey County; he loved the land, its water, its history and all its peoples. Les dedicated his life to researching, documenting and speaking about local history, in particular the forgotten and discarded history of early African-Canadian settlers in Grey County.

He volunteered his time and skills for the public benefit and public interest and in particular for civil rights, social justice, and equality for all peoples. For Les believed that everyone's history is important.

Many of our fellow citizens stood on the shoulders of this gentle giant because they respected his leadership, reassured by his fearless courage and were inspired by his unwavering principles of inclusiveness and pluralism.

This man of all seasons made a monumental difference in how Grey County sees itself and interprets its history, but also in how others see Grey County – provincially, nationally and globally. With this legacy, we all now live in a more decent, tolerant and civilized society."

Robert Leverty, President, Ontario Historical Society

These awards were brought about by Les' extensive contributions to the Grey Bruce and the overall Black History landscape in Canada including:

- Founding Member, First Chair & President of the Old Durham Pioneer Road Black Cemetery Restoration Committee serving 10+ Years. This project is the prototype for the reclamation of desecrated cemeteries, was inaugurated by Lincoln Alexander and recognized as a site of Historical Significance. This cemetery's history was filmed by CBC: "Speakers for the Dead" <http://www.nfb.ca/film/speakers-for-the-dead/>
- Founding Member and 1st President, Heritage Pathways, Durham, Ontario a group whose mission is to discover, preserve and promote public awareness of the many pathways to Ontario's heritage
- On the Editorial Board for the development of the book, "Black Canadians: A Long Line of Fighters" which was the inspiration behind the development of the Ontario Black History Society started by Wilson Brooks and Dan Hill
- Initiator in the re-printing of an 1889 manuscript *Broken Shackles* about the life of an escaped slave, James Henson, who eventually made his way to Owen Sound, working closely with editor Peter Meyler
- Original restoration consultant for the Silver Shoe Cemetery showing segregated, white and eventual integrated burials
- Recognized speaker on Black History to organizations such as the Centre of Oro Settlement and numerous others
- Fundraising Director, Flesherton & District Area Board of Management

Les' vision and mindset can best be summed up in his following quote:

“A number of minority groups have been marginalized to the point where they don’t even show up in history. We have hundreds of years of very positive influence by early black pioneers that have shaped the very nature of the community we live in. It’s worthy of us to acknowledge that, to be aware of it, to learn from it and to use it as a measurement of growth... We need to see ourselves in the landscape of history. We have a proud heritage that’s a shared history ...we have a duty to respect that contribution.”

"Many white residents of Priceville joined a committee in 1989 to reclaim the cemetery, find the stones and restore dignity to the black pioneers. This effort was led by Les MacKinnon, who grew up hearing the stories about the "darkies' cemetery." Les would say he was always bothered that he could walk to the grave of his grandfathers but that some of the people related to black settlers could not." Les spearheaded this reclamation, physically uncovering headstones covered over by potato fields, in the basements of homes and as baseball diamond bases, resurrecting and rebuilding as much as could be restored.

https://books.google.ca/books?id=1N0RUya23fAC&pg=PA204&lpg=PA204&dq=les+mackinnon+priceville&source=bl&ots=cXjyb13MXf&sig=UFnZcD2grKv54H7MG5x1Vlq_4&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=les%20mackinnon%20priceville&f=false (pg 201)

" Some say only the dead in this town can speak the truth about how a virtually all-black settlement in Canada turned virtually all-white." "It was as if the town were trying to erase the very existence of the black pioneers who settled this area in the early 1800s. Hide the fact that some of the whites who came here later married some of the blacks. Hide the fact that many generations later, some white people still living in this town may not be white at all. Just a drop, they used to say."- *A Whitewashing of History: Canadian Town Tried To Bury Its Founding By Black Pioneers* by DeNeen L. Brown, Washington Post Foreign Service, Sunday, February 17, 2002; <http://www.emancipation.ca/community-black-history/2009/1/21/a-whitewashing-of-history.html>, Washington Post/ <http://www.emancipation.ca/community-black-history/2009/1/21/a-whitewashing-of-history.html>

This effort was led by Les MacKinnon, who grew up hearing the stories about the "darkies' cemetery." MacKinnon said he was always bothered that he could walk to the grave of his grandfathers but that some of the people related to black settlers could not.

“A number of minority groups have been marginalized to the point where they don’t even show up in history. We have hundreds of years of very positive influence by early black pioneers that have shaped the very nature of the community we live in. It’s worthy of us to acknowledge that, to be aware of it, to learn from it and to use it as a measurement of growth of a civilized area where people can actually judge people on something else other than the colour of their skin.”

‘We need to see ourselves in the landscape of history. We have a proud heritage that’s a shared history ...we have a duty to respect that contribution.’

Les contributed his knowledge and love of history through speaker engagements and volunteering with the Owen Sound Emancipation Celebration Festival (longest continuously held in North America); Silver Shoe Cemetery where he was an original restoration consultant; Grey County Black History Event and the Emancipation Festival Speakers' Forum recently renamed on his behalf (Keynote speaker).

Rod Charles, Originator of BlackVoice.com recognized Les as a Griot . "A Griot is a human library ... a storyteller/a historian. In many black African tribes a Griot is ... a tangible link to the past, someone who not only could be touched, but could also touch you with stories and facts about who you were as a person."

Les, himself, was a Griot. He is recognized as coining the phrase, “oral history”. "Historians only now are learning the importance of speaking with ordinary people who have had history passed down to them from word of mouth” Oral culture cuts across racial, educational and political lines." - Les McKinnon